

# WORLD TRADE ENTREPRENEUR

HELAL AL MARRI, DUBAI WORLD TRADE CENTRE CEO, CHAMPIONS REGIONAL GROWTH AND THE ACA. **JULIANA SANCTO**



**H**elal Al Marri's door at the prestigious Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) is always open to young UAE nationals contemplating training as chartered accountants. Grateful for the counsel he received as a young student, he is only too willing to play a similar mentoring role to the next generation of Emiratis.

During his BA in finance with accounting at Kent university, Al Marri had sought guidance from business leaders of banks and industrial companies on professional development opportunities. 'Their approachability and willingness to afford time to engage a student was rather surprising,' he recalls.

The advice he received was unequivocal: become a chartered accountant. 'The idea came from industry veterans, rather than from speaking to chartered accountants directly. That direction proved invaluable for my career and I hope to be able to do the same for anyone that may approach me today.'

Qualifying with KPMG in London in 2000, Al Marri became a member of an elite 'club' – a small group of UAE nationals who hold the ACA. He then joined global management consultancy McKinsey & Company, before moving on

to strategic corporate and sector development in the Middle East.

## FAMILY INFLUENCE

Al Marri's interest in business started at an early age. His role model was his entrepreneurial father, Saeed Khalfan Al Marri, a retired brigadier in the Dubai Police Force who created his own enterprise which he diversified into manufacturing, technology, construction, petrochemicals and fire safety.

'Curiosity has always been my driver,' says Al Marri. 'Even as a teenager, I wanted to learn everything about starting, growing and sustaining a business.' His inspiration was his father's company and, 'by 2002, I had developed quite an independent entrepreneurial approach in my thinking and was eager to try my hand at a start-up, alongside furthering my engagement in the family firm'.

His decision to pursue an MBA at London Business School was a logical progression to his career, paving the way to his present high-profile role. Appointed by the government of Dubai strategically to transform and grow the Dubai World

**His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai (centre left) and Helal Al Marri (centre right) take an official tour of GITEX, the Dubai World Trade Centre's flagship information and communications technology exhibition**

Trade Centre, it was a challenging role, the nomination for which he acknowledges was driven by his additional ACA background.

'I was privileged to be afforded this opportunity,' he says. 'Over the last six years my role has been as much about defining strategic initiatives and change management as it has been about putting in place best-practices in financial discipline and governance measures that were engrained in me during my time in audit and transaction services.'

### REGIONAL GROWTH

Al-Marri's international experience and 'exposure to truly world-class client delivery', as well as 'hands-on understanding of the regional dynamics' made him a prescient choice to deliver the Emirate's goals for DWTC.

Under his leadership, the complex has become the Middle East and North Africa region's primary business networking hub and one of the 'most preferred exhibition venues of the world'. The original 1979 tower today has a linked state-of-the-art convention centre, three hotels and an additional office tower. With some 1,400 staff running over 100 trade shows and many more conferences and business events, the venue attracts 1.2m visitors a year and contributes between 1.5-2% to Dubai's annual GDP [expected to reach nearly \$230bn during 2011].

Al Marri admits to 'instant gratification' when he walks the concourse during any of the flagship exhibitions and sees how DWTC has helped seal Dubai's reputation as the 'destination for mega sector events'. This is particularly so because he had tapped into the shift he noticed across the wider region, away from leisure tourism to leveraging MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions) and business tourism to drive more foreign direct investment.

One of the Centre's outstanding successes is GITEX, the region's 31-year old flagship information technology event which he has grown to attract 136,000 world-wide visitors and 3,500 exhibitors. It has, according to Al Marri, not just driven the Emirate's own ICT growth and transformation, but also made 'a lasting contribution in shaping the technology landscape of the Middle East, Africa and Asia'.

But his biggest achievement, he says, is in finally getting recognition of the inherent value of MICE in driving strong economic growth for the region. 'The fact that Dubai had the foresight to capitalise on this opportunity and DWTC has played a key enabling role in that effort through the last five to six years is something that makes me especially proud.'

### TRANSITION FROM WEST TO EAST

Given his family background, the transition from West to the Middle East business environment was, surprisingly, not straightforward. 'The learning curve was steeper than simply acquiring industry knowledge or adapting to the job of CEO,' he says. 'Business here is based on trust and relationship building and the environment is not as rigid as it may be in Europe or the US. Ambiguity can be seen as a challenge by some but, to me, this was a canvas that gave me an opportunity to define where I wanted the road to lead.'

This openness and ability to adapt appropriately to cultural nuances is so important, he believes, that 'to be a truly successful business leader, emotional intelligence is probably the most critical skill set to develop'.

Al Marri is hugely supportive and enthusiastic about the new ICAEW Emiratisation Scholarship Scheme [see p97] to train young Emiratis as ACAs. It comes on the back of an idea

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he had in 2005 when, as a local employer, the lack of home-grown top talent in accounting and finance became very evident.

The scheme also comes at the right time for the region. 'During the peak growth years,' he says, 'businesses were almost seeking "non-accountant" finance professionals. It became commonplace to say that assuming that a good accountant is good at finance is about as bad as assuming a person with good penmanship can write poetry. Clearly times have changed and the folly of this mindset is starkly evident.'

### CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

For Al Marri, it's not simply about filling immediate skills gaps in the local population or even that for youngsters, the transition to ACA 'is the ideal platform to command the top jobs in business and industry'. It's, again, also about long-term economic issues. He sees a fundamental role for the accounting profession in the region to enable what he sees as 'a cultural transformation'.

'Deep rooted governance standards and transparency principles that global accounting firms and an accounting education advocate are critical to sustainable business growth,' he says. 'And there has probably never been a more pertinent need for businesses [here] to revisit the core values that traditional accounting firms instil in a professional environment – probably more so than pre-2008.'

The Dubai World debt default crisis in late 2009 did not help. 'We did feel the impact of the negative international media attention on Dubai's debt situation,' admits Al Marri. 'But progress on the Dubai World restructuring and efforts made to address concerns on information sharing have resulted in a visible upswing in market sentiment.'

Al Marri is bullish about the future. The Gulf ended 2010 with forecasted 4% growth compared to flat or negative growth in most markets around the world, he says. As he begins to point out that UAE's growth is due to strong diversification, you reflect that the same is true of him – at still only 34. Yet as this master of change reflects, some things are simply fundamental.

'In the last six years, I've focused on service, sustainability and stakeholders. Change has been a constant, but I've found that the more things have changed, the more these priorities have remained the same.'

### CV

- **Who:** Helal Saeed Khalfan Al Marri
- **Born:** 1976, Dubai
- **Work:** Chief executive officer, Dubai World Trade Centre, 2004-present; consultant, McKinsey & Company, 2000-2002; KPMG, London, 1997-2000. Independent non-executive director of Depa United Group and Aramex; board member of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, Zabeel Investments and Taaleem pjsc; chairman of Emirates NBD Asset Management, Emirates Financial Services and the Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Sports Complex.
- **Life:** Married, three boys
- **Hobbies:** Fishing, volleyball, football